

About 1750 words

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BIG JOHN

When he slipped, he did it with style.

Big John Bietenduefel had a way of keeping me awake on the road. Space between seat and steering wheel being tight, he stuck his arms through the wheel, steered the old Chevy pickup with his elbows, and used his hands to explain the tying of the Bietenduefel Beetle. I watched very carefully. His big fingers had played a lot of football but his tiny trout-flies were of museum quality. And besides, there might be a slippery patch coming up in the road.

If I skidded into the role of straight man, it was because John's act left no choice. At our first stop, he put away three eggs, sausage, and buttered toast while I had a bowl of muesli with skim milk. Down the road a few miles, John slipped into a convenience store for cinnamon rolls while I pumped the gasoline. Then we steered toward Gene Todd's farm for coffee and cookies.

John liked to spend time with farmers in general -- perhaps because they knew as much about troubles as he did -- and Gene was a special, two-cup friend. Over the coffee we decided on several football coaches who should be fired, though Gene might have preferred to get at more pressing work. It was after noon when Big John and I started into the fields with our traditional hunters' farewell, which was me telling him to take it easy because he was more than I could carry back.

As we left the house, the season's first winter storm blew into the valley with a sound like snow tires. A jackrabbit bolted at the howl. John's Fudge, a German shorthaired pointer bitch, bolted after the hare. I tried to send a sharp message to my own dog, but my lips were too cold to seal around the whistle and the sound came out as phoot-phoot instead of tweet-tweet. If my pup failed to join the chase, it was only because he had picked up a competing scent of pheasant.

The rooster tried to fly directly into the gale and I might have got him, but for a problem I'd rather not mention. Pup watched me miss twice, looked back at me, and yipped. John asked the same question and now you're putting me on the spot too. Fact is that our dogs had created confusion that morning in the motel and somehow the lower half of my long underwear got on backwards, which might not have become an urgent problem except for the two cups of coffee, or maybe it was three, the effects of which hit me just as the pup tightened on point. Sort of cramped my swing.

If that bird had hovered in front of Big John, however, he

would have hit it without excuses. He shot all five of his shotguns well despite different stock dimensions. I had to stick to one gun, but then I was used to being the skinny kid who dropped passes. John was the husky player who caught them, got a football scholarship to college, and might have had an offer to play professionally except that he had the bad luck to be scouted right after a night on the town. Thirty years later he could still walk fast, though not fast enough to keep up with his dog. It's too bad that dogs need more training than guns.

Fudge had chased down the jackrabbit by the time we found her, a couple of miles away. John scolded her but she knew that he would have shot the hare if she hadn't beaten him to it. When a big white-tailed jack volunteered for removal from the gene pool, John found the temptation as hard to pass up as cigarettes, poker machines, and the couch in front of the television set. He was the world's largest teddy bear, smiling shyly as he teetered at the edge of a fall, and I kept reaching to pull him back. Fudge, on the contrary, was delighted when he slipped.

The slips progressed to outcomes that you could never quite foresee in time to interfere with fate. One day along the Madison River, for example, a car with California license plates braked to a stop and two young women, each in cut-off jeans and a mosquito-friendly top, jumped out to watch John send seventy feet of line whistling over the stream.

"Look," said the woman with brown hair, "he's fly-fishing!"

Thus encouraged, John made a smoking back cast, sloshed

further out, double-hauled his line, and dropped from sight. Only his hat remained visible but it was a Great White Hunter model and it floated with panache. He emerged spouting, grabbed the hat, and gurgled back to the bank with waders full of water.

"It doesn't look like much fun," said the blonde.

Big John had no family of his own when I met him, unless you counted the pointers, which he certainly did. He and Fudge and two retired shorthairs were denned up in what looked like Yosemite Sam's winter cabin. A forest of rod-tubes sprouted in the corner, a school of stuffed trout finned across the walls, a pride of fly-tying furs sunned on the table, and a belly-boat relaxed on the sofa.

"I need to get the place cleaned out," John said.

"You need to get married," I said. I thought I was kidding.

His new wife changed everything -- almost. Sally and John moved into a house which she kept neat despite his entertainment center with the three channel-changers. She was, moreover, around to cheer him up when his outboard motor jumped off the transom in deep water, and she continued fishing with him even after she got stuck in the mud during their first float-tubing expedition. He was eating better, losing weight, and running the county's alcohol-abuse program. It was the perfect job for John, because he loved helping people and they knew it.

He would not turn down folks who were thirsty for hunting, either, and they remembered how fond they were of John every fall. He would provide directions to a good bench for sharptails,

very confidentially, for a fellow who would tell nobody but the two guys with him, each of whom was equally discrete with his other buddies, and by next season John would have to look for another place to do his own hunting.

The only complaints about John's marriage came from his Chevy pickup. Its cab held the lighter residues of his old life -- dog-whistles and radar-detector dangling from mirror, guns lining roof and back window, maps stashed behind seats. Loose gear included binoculars, sunglasses, ammunition, and knives. Fudge would rearrange these items to her satisfaction by turning around three times before she went to sleep on the seat. Usually what fell out was just soft-drink cans. She felt badly about the new camera.

The rest of the gear was stowed safely under the camper top, and the weight blew out four tires on the same antelope hunt.

I always offered to drive my own truck -- both hands on the wheel -- but moving John's equipment was out of the question. That's why we found ourselves on the banks of a trout stream next August when the Chevy fried its ignition module. John hiked east toward the road to hitch a ride. Unfortunately, the road was to the south.

Before our next hunting season, John put a new engine in the old truck and got heavy-duty tires -- all four of them at once. The Chevy showed its appreciation by taking us far back into sage-grouse country before dawn.

John looked for birds moving toward alfalfa while I worked

deeper into the sagebrush. I passed up the mature cocks, which held at the end of long scent-trails, and took three delicious young birds. John shot whenever his new pup, Traveler, did everything right. Two of his birds were huge, tough old bull grouse, but the pup was worth it. Gunner and dog were both prancing when they got back to the Chevy. In hindsight, it might have been better to let Traveler finish his dance outside the cab, because he managed to push down the door-locking button while the engine was running and we humans were both outside.

John tied a lot of flies over the winter and I made some Bietenduefel Beetles too, but an accident in May derailed our fishing plans. He turned Fudge and Traveler loose together for exercise. Fudge found a jackrabbit and chased it. Traveler tagged along. Neither came back. John never learned what got them, but a lost dog is always in trouble in this country. He spent the fishing season roaming the hills, asking farmers if they had seen his canine family. He blamed himself but wondered why he had to get caught every time he slipped up.

He was lucky to get a new dog named Jake -- a shorthair better than Fudge and perhaps as good as Traveler. Come October, we all hunted together in tall grass planted under the Conservation Reserve Program. John got one pheasant over a point, then lost Jake. Whistled for him. Cussed him out. Accused him of chasing jackrabbits. Found him far off, hidden in the grass, holding another rooster. I remember the shot, which was perfect. I remember the promise, too. John said that he would get a

beeper-collar before he lost another dog. He'd had enough of avoidable accidents.

He did not expect what happened next and neither did I, not so soon. After pulling out of so many skids, John had come to seem almost immortal. I wanted to believe that his heart operations had made him as healthy as his truck with the new engine. Even so, I had a habit of looking across the fields to be sure that his massive figure was still standing, still all right.

Sally called late one evening to tell me about John's last hunt. A group from the local chapter of Pheasants Forever had taken young people out, she said, to teach them the ways of birds and dogs. John had volunteered, leaving his gun in the pickup so that he could guide a 12-year-old boy. Instead, the boy had to run for help when his coach collapsed. Big John's big heart had given up too soon but in the right place, out in the field on a November afternoon.